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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PORT AU PRINCE 001932

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND EMBOFFS VISIT CITE SOLEIL: LIFE AT GROUND LEVEL

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Classified By: Ambassador Janet A. Sanderson, reason 1.5(b).

¶1. (C) Summary. Ambassador and emboffs visited the impoverished Port au Prince neighborhood of Cite Soleil on October 10 at the invitation of MINUSTAH Force Commander General Elito. Based on our observations, signs of life appear to be returning to what some in the past have called the most dangerous place in Haiti. The streets are busy and people are out and about. Schools have reopened. MINUSTAH troops have made significant progress in bringing security, infrastructure, and social services. Despite MINUSTAH's efforts, however, key to success in Cite Soleil will be the return of the government. The gangs retain the capacity of upsetting the slum's fragile peace and Elito told Ambassador that his ability to deal with the security problem will depend on President Preval's negotiations with gang leaders. Our brief visit went a long way in dispelling many misperceptions about what has become, for many, the test case of Haiti's return to democracy. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) At the invitation of MINUSTAH General Force Commander General Elito, the Ambassador, DAO, poloff, conoff and A/RSOs made a windshield tour of Cite Soleil, the first full visit to the Port-au-Prince slum by Embassy personnel in two years. Escorted by two Brazilian armored personnel carriers and a bevy of well-armed Embassy security officials, our convoy began at MINUSTAH Checkpoint Two just south of Cite Soleil along Route National 1, followed the slum's perimeter along Soleil 9, crossed into the city center, stopping at MINUSTAH's checkpoint 16, and ended at the wharf before returning to the Embassy via Route National 1 and La Saline, another "hot zone." In little more than 2 hours, we traversed most of the 2 square miles of what is, in most people's estimations, Haiti's worst slum. The low-key visit attracted little excitement among the residents and no press attention, but offered us a brief window on a world which has been off-limits for more than two years.

¶3. (SBU) In the heart of Cite Soleil, adjacent to the central market and across from a sign which reads "welcome to the square of proud Cite Soleil" sits MINUSTAH's Checkpoint 16. An old factory, the site houses troops from Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile who patrol the neighborhood. This concrete

building turned bunker is camouflaged in green, surrounded by barbed wire and piled high with sandbags. Strategically centered, soldiers are able to look out over the entire neighborhood to the sea and back towards Route 1. Inside this 2-story building, MINUSTAH has placed large drums of water for bathing and cooking, a generator provides electricity to the operation, a doctor is present, and bunk beds line the second floor wall so that there is 24-hour presence. To support their operations, they have computers and detailed area maps, as well as weaponry.

¶ 4. (SBU) On the right side of the building housing Checkpoint 16, residents have abandoned their one-room, bullet-riddled concrete homes, presumably moving elsewhere to escape the violence. On the left side, the checkpoint oversees the main Cite Soleil market, which has grown to engulf (and virtually destroy) one of the intersection's primary arteries. MINUSTAH is working with the GOH to move part of the market across the road and repair the main road. Elito noted that his troops are also clearing garbage - they have already collected 5000 cubic tons - from Route National 9, a major perimeter road on the slum's east side which heads north, in three stages. They will pave Route 9 and hope to have the road completed in 60 days. (Note: Route National 9 was originally built by the USG in the 80's and is often referred to as the American Road. End Note.) These roads will give access to the neighborhood but also serve as a way to separate the gangs.

¶ 5. (SBU) Checkpoint 16 was, in earlier days, the site of gun battles between MINUSTAH's Jordanian troops and slum gang lords. However, with the Brazilians' recent move into the slum and continued pressure on the gangs, Elito reports that there has been no incoming fire since mid-August. Checkpoint 16 will be the center of joint HNP/MINUSTAH patrol operations; following our arrival at the installation, a Haitian National Police Intervention and Order Maintenance

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Corps (CIMO) showed up to begin patrols. Groups of children surround the building to play and took candy from the Brazilian troops. As the vehicles drove through from checkpoint, the children showed enthusiastic support for the troops, giving thumbs up to both Elito and the Ambassador.

¶ 6. (SBU) Its reputation for violence notwithstanding, Cite Soleil was busy with traffic on the day we visited. Three schools have now reopened - two elementary schools and one high school. Across from checkpoint 16, MINUSTAH had refurbished the community square, where they plan to install a generator to show movies and provide a community gathering point. Street commerce is present. Women sit in a makeshift market selling fruits and vegetables or second hand clothes. Men with wheel barrels clean the street and fisherman busy themselves with boat and net repairs. Cite Soleil is crossed by a surprising number of small secondary roads, many funded by the USG (and marked by signs with the USAID joined-hands logo) which wind back into the slum. These roads are, for the most part clean and appeared well maintained although we did not leave the main roads to examine them further. Interestingly enough, some houses appear to have their own generators.

¶ 7. (SBU) Despite the busy market, foot traffic and "tap-taps," we saw very little evidence of any real commercial activity such as one finds in the rest of Port-au-Prince -- no cafes, car repair shops, stationary stores or beauty parlors. The gas stations are closed. Gutted lotto booths and shells of former businesses line the streets. The area's canals, which were built during the first Preval administration, appear to be in relatively good repair although many are clogged by trash. Notably, one large industrial metal factory (Acierie d'Haiti) remains in operation along Route National 1.

¶ 8. (SBU) What is truly missing in Cite Soleil is any evidence

whatsoever of a government presence. The local commissariat (police station) has been destroyed, as has a police substation. There is no mayor. No deputy has yet been elected from the area to the 46th legislature. Municipal services, such as they are elsewhere, do not exist in Cite Soleil; canal cleaning and garbage disposal services, for instance, are being handled by MINUSTAH and USG-funded IOM projects respectively. Youths hang out around markets, unemployed and unschooled. Clearly, the main challenge for the GOH will be winning back the hearts and minds of a population in an area so long neglected.

¶9. (C) Security remains the critical issue. Elito told us that he is beginning to bottle the gangs up and limit their maneuverability. He knows where the leaders are: as we drove by small streets and alleys, he would point out "Evans lives down that street another block....Admaral's house is 200 meters over there." He stressed that the gangs are feeling the pressure and know that MINUSTAH watches them all the time. However, he stressed that he has no idea what President Preval is saying to the gangs when they talk; how the President manages these negotiations will impact directly on Elito's efforts to rid Cite Soleil of the gangs.

¶10. (SBU) From our very limited perspective behind the windshield of armoured vehicles, it was hard to assess the attitude of the residents. However, we saw no overt signs of hostility to MINUSTAH or to us. The convoy drove by markets, schools and groups of people with little effect, apart from children seeking candy. Nonetheless, Elito showed us a building in the wharf area that his troops used to monitor activity which had been badly damaged by residents while the troops were out on patrol. Elito has no illusions, noting some of the citizenry want his forces there, some don't, and most -- who are scraping together a living -- don't really care.

¶11. (C) Comment. We are reluctant to draw too many conclusions about Cite Soleil from this brief visit. Yet certain things stand out. The slum has taken on mythic proportions in the minds of many, both here and abroad. Yet

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it is a small, surprisingly containable area. Parts of it are open space. Many of its roads are paved. It was relatively quiet - or so it was during our visit. Women and children walk the mostly un-littered main streets. Men sit playing chess and cards. Make no mistake, however. Life in Cite Soleil is miserable and poor for many. Gangs remain armed and control large swaths of territory. Criminality is high. At this point, they still retain the capacity to disrupt the area's fragile peace. MINUSTAH is beginning to build community confidence and restoring some sense of public order. It is reaching out. Now it is time for the government to follow suit.

¶12. (C) Comment continued. Regretfully, this trip cannot yet make up part of our routine Embassy outreach. The security situation in the area, although improving under MINUSTAH's eye, still demands close monitoring and appropriate precautions. Our movements were carefully coordinated and planned in conjunction with MINUSTAH; scarce MINUSTAH and Embassy security resources were heavily deployed in support of the visit. Nonetheless, this opportunity to see life in Cite Soleil at ground level has been invaluable for our understanding of the enormous challenges which confront Haiti.

SANDERSON